CONVERSION, POLITICS AND RELIGION IN ENGLAND, 1580–1625

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Introduction

Why offer to the press yet another book about politics and religion in early modern England? Considering the current flood of published material on the dissensions within the English Church before the Civil War, one might well admit, with John Hacket, that 'the easie Dispatch of so many Sheets in a day . . . hath found the World a great deal more Work then needs'.[1] My defence for adding to these torrents of paper is that this monograph is not another general review of the quarrels between Catholics and Protestants in late-sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England. But its central topic – conversion to and from the Church of Rome – does, I hope, allow for a revision of aspects of the historiography of those quarrels, and principally in that vexed question of the course and intensity of the later English Reformation. Historians have recognised that there was considerable flux in religious opinion and practice during this period but they have notoriously disagreed about the speed and efficiency with which Protestant religion was accepted and enforced. There is little meeting of minds between those who see the triumph of novelty and reform and those who perceive insuperable obstacles to it, a mixture of Romishness and die-hard opposition to anything new.

Deciphering the course of the English Reformation has always entailed determining whether, primarily, politicians exploited Reformed ideas to achieve their political aims, or whether an irrepressible wash of novel, humanist, Protestant theological discourse exploited, and even sometimes determined, the ebb and flow of political conflict. I suggest that the perennial debate over the chains of causation in Reformation history can be extended by trying to determine what made a person think he had become either a Protestant or a Catholic, and also what the aims were of the manipulative controllers who sought to induce change of religion in him. This is not to pretend that a study of individual converts allows anything so precise as an accurate geographical or chronological record of the flux in

[1] John Hacket, *Scrinia Reserata* (1693), I, 1.

Protestant and Catholic allegiances. (Conversion does not generally lend itself to quantitative analysis.) But, even if the Protestant Reformation in England cannot be described as a series of individual conversions, an analysis of individual uncertainty and resolution of doubt may affect the way we think about central questions in Reformation studies.

On its own it might not seem very remarkable that, once the battle lines were drawn, a decision to become a Catholic or a Protestant in England should always be partly a matter of politics and partly a matter of religion, and that, try as they might, people could not consciously adhere to the Roman or the English Church without having an eye constantly to both sorts of motive. It is a commonplace in all ecclesiastical history that doctrinal beliefs have the capacity to engender factional allegiances which have a political character. In that the Church is an institution in which power is exercised by some over others, an organised form of ecclesiastical society as well as a religious concept, it has political characteristics, and the things which it does (even the way that it expresses doctrine) are affected by political considerations. In addition, because religious opinion affects the way that people behave, those who exercise authority on behalf of the State cannot ignore people's opinions about religion. In late-sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, attitudes to Rome incorporated not just a series of doctrines about grace but also a view of the relationship between the Church and the State. None of this is very surprising. But it is quite another thing to define exactly how politics and religion commingled in ecclesiastical flux. Conversion is an ideal topic for this type of study because it is drawn out of a matrix of political and religious factors. Consequently conversion is a key to unlocking the nature of religious allegiance in this period. It may be no great insight to perceive that, when people wavered between Roman and Protestant allegiances in England, the rationality of following their own best material interests could be disrupted by anxieties about right and principled belief and conduct just as easily as the purity of their faith and its observance could be clouded by the need to look to their temporal well-being. Still a view of the tensions plaguing the mind of the man who found himself engaged by politico-ecclesiastical questions allows us to think beyond the rigid and stultifying classifications of people based just on their outward behaviour (for example, whether they conformed to the observance of the religion established by law). Not everyone who acted outwardly in a similar way shared identical thought patterns. What are we to make of people who do not really fit into the pigeonhole categories of 'recusant' or 'conformist'? How do we interpret the motivation of the dutiful conforming 'church papist' who, when not under the watchful gaze of the State, suddenly exhibited an enthusiasm for religious ideas of which the State did not approve? More particularly, what of the moderate 'Church

of England man' who suddenly adopted explicit Romish opinions, or the rigid Protestant enthusiast who exchanged his Protestant doctrinal enthusiasms for precisely the ones which before he claimed most fervently to reject?

It might be thought that, when political and religious motives mixed, one would naturally subordinate the other almost into extinction. How could the purity of religious motivation (the persuasions based on theological discourse leading towards the regulation of a man's life and faith) autonomously coexist with political motivations (e.g., preservation of estates, career and self against the State's potentially violent intolerance of religious deviance) to believe and practice one thing rather than another? If a man's religious affections happened to coincide with the dictates of the regime, he was fortunate in not having to wrestle with conscience over his external religious profession. But, if a conflict did occur, then historians have tended to assume that he had to take the difficult path of principled resistance (and take the consequences) or cynically make a political accommodation with authority. Thus we see the historiographical fragmentation of the religious and ecclesiastical spectrum into zealots and conformists, and notably the Romish recusant Catholics separated out from the church papists or schismatics, the lukewarm ones who would, if necessary, be circumcised at Constantinople 'with a mentall reservation'.[2]

But this study argues that when political and religious motives were both engaged in the mind of the individual convert they were maintained in a constant tension; they do not fuse, nor is one subordinated to the other. This approach to the paradoxes of politico-religious conflict allows us to determine the nature of ecclesiastical allegiance in a more sophisticated way than by saying merely that a certain person changed his religion because either his patron went to the wall, or he became alienated, wanted a better clerical job, more money, felt persecuted, had a mid-life crisis, or redefined his opinions about the doctrine of predestination. We can thus describe how different elements of political and religious motivation combined with each other and acted out of their separate spheres to influence individuals who were not securely anchored in their religion. In addition, since conversion was recognised as having a continuing quality as well as being a one-off event, its study can tell us not just about the nature of the initial decision to change religion, but, more generally, what it meant to be a Roman Catholic or a Protestant in England during this period.

It is common knowledge that in theology, conversion refers primarily to the way in which sinful man is made regenerate by grace. Nevertheless, the

[2] BL, Harl. MS 1221, fo. 65^{v}.

theology of conversion raises certain imperatives about the sort of Church to which the regenerate man should adhere. This promotes a second type of conversion, namely between ecclesiastical institutions, which takes on a political character. The question of whether a man thinks that he has converted to the true Church, true faith or more generally to true religion raises the question of what he thinks about the conversion of others. The state of other people's religion affects his perception of the structure and regulation and government of the Church to which he and they both think they belong. After the break with Rome, a welter of contradictory philosophical views about central Christian tenets engaged with a series of political conflicts so that, for some, the alignment of true faith and Church with institutional faith and Church became exceptionally intense. The association of the two meant that alteration of opinions about the one naturally tended to promote alteration of opinions about the other. It was virtually impossible for people in this period to explain one aspect of change in religious opinion or practice without referring to the other sorts of conversion with which they were familiar: a man's fluctuation between Rome and the Church of England must affect his standing in grace just as deterioration (or amelioration) in his life and 'conversation' could be attributed to his consorting with (or rejection of) the errors and workmen of Romish popery or Protestant heresy.

This study therefore operates on two levels. First, it explores aspects of individual conversion between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in England in the later Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. On a second level it tries to relate individual alterations of opinion to some of the larger questions about the later English Reformation. It seems fairly clear to historians that at some point in Elizabeth's reign England became a Protestant country, but the debate about Protestantisation has more than occasionally been bedevilled by imprecision as to what it meant for England (or Englishmen) to be Protestant. This book, while not pretending to be a revision of everything which English Reformation historians have said, aims, by studying the microcosm of conversion, to reflect on the ways in which England could be said to have become Protestant.

THE POLITICS OF CONVERSION, 1580–1625

In one sense, of course, the issue was decided by the end of the 1580s. A forcible change of national religion with foreign military assistance was now no longer possible (assuming that it ever had been). English Catholics started to accept minority status. Rome imposed a severe definition of what it meant to be a Roman Catholic in England. The political conflict between the Churches was clarified and intensified, and alteration of a man's religious

allegiance became an extreme step. Did the extremism of Romanist politics, its scheming and flirtations with resistance theory, drive a wedge between religious and political Romanism? Outside the propaganda about popery and the threat from Rome, we might think, people would have made decisions about what they really believed in matters of faith in one part of their minds, and dealt with the aspect of religion which touched on allegiance to institutional Churches in another part entirely.

But large numbers of people were compelled to think about which Church they really belonged to precisely because faith was inextricably connected with the fact of the royal supremacy and the challenge to it which definitions of papal primacy seemed to imply. As Edmund Bunny wrote in reply to Robert Persons, English Romanism was proving a tough nut to crack because

> no man . . . can be of that profession [Roman Catholicism], unlesse hee bee under that governement too. Could their Church, and court [of Rome] be sundred; could their religion and regiment be parted . . . then indeed I think that (with many) much might be done; but when as these go so close togither, than no man can professe the one, but that he must be under the other, that goeth . . . somwhat hard with many, that otherwise would finde no scruple at al.[3]

Undoubtedly many people would have liked politics and religion kept apart. Those Catholic clerics who saw their best interests served by a termination of the more ambitious plans for a Catholic succession wanted to sever the connection between their clerical affiliation and their political allegiance.[4] Thomas Wright, a Jesuit who left the order in 1593 on political grounds, seemed to think that just because he was a loyalist the English regime would allow him to follow his conscience in matters of religion.[5] The Lancashire gentleman John Ashton in 1605 said under examination that his conscience would not allow him to conform to the established religion but he acknowledged in his conscience the lawfulness of the royal supremacy.[6] Towards the end of this period we find people like Richard Montagu speculating on the separation of the Church of Rome from the Court of Rome.[7] But such accommodations flew in the face of most contemporary experience. Movement in one sphere meant movement in the other. John Racster expressed a truism when he wrote that 'the change of Common-wealths . . .

[3] Edmund Bunny, *A Booke of Christian Exercise* (1585), sig. Yvii^{r}.

[4] A. Pritchard, *Catholic Loyalism in Elizabethan England* (1979), 198; AAW, A VII, 444–5.

[5] BL, Lansd. MS 109, fo. 48^{r}.

[6] J. Tait (ed.), *Lancashire Quarter Session Records* (Chetham Society, new series, 77, Manchester, 1917), 282–3.

[7] Bodl., Rawl. MS D 1331, fo. 152^{v}. When toleration came, temporarily, in August 1622, its basis was the suspension of penalties against Catholics in 'any point of recusancy which concerns religion only, and not matter of State', *CSPD 1619–23*, 436.

especially . . . beginneth with the change of religion', and that alterations of government are generally preceded by notorious heresy or schism.[8] Virtually all Protestant polemicists treated the Catholics' toleration petitions in 1603 as an attempt to bring about a change of religion which would snowball into a subversion of the commonwealth.[9] When Archbishop Marc'Antonio de Dominis asserted to Bishop Richard Neile in 1622 that Rome was a true Church (thus justifying his decision to return to full communion with it) Neile did not deny it but said that 'the toleration of two Religions would bee a certaine cause of a combustion in the Church; and subversion of the whole State'.[10] Conversely, political alteration was seen to cause religious change. In 1607 William Bedell reported from Venice how disappointing it was that the Venetian State and the papacy had reached a compromise over their political quarrels. Nevertheless, Bedell thought that the Pope's power 'ys irrecoverablie broken heere, and long yt will not be ere some change [of religion] follow'.[11] The English in Venice had reluctantly decided 'that to propound . . . [Protestant religion] in it owne naked simplici[ty] to men . . . blinded with superstition . . . were but to expose it to contempt'. Bedell believed, however, that the 'same men [who would ridicule Protestant doctrine] read gladly discourses of pollicy, so . . . [if] under that name [re]ligion could be conveied it were like to find much better entertainement'.[12] Thomas Harding, the polemical writer who abandoned his Protestantism after Mary's accession, thanked God 'who used the chaunge of the time, as an occasion and meane, whereby to chaunge . . . [him] unto the better'. By 'the new condition of the time' he was 'compelled to seeke the truth which before . . . [he] knew not, and willingly to holde that, which before . . . [he] refused'.[13] God could bring divine order out of human disorder.

Politics, though, was a two-edged sword. God did not always choose to correct human political errors and vice. The existence of a Protestant regime

[8] John Racster, *A Booke of the Seven Planets* (1598), sig. A2^{v}.

[9] Gabriel Powel, *The Catholikes Supplication* (1603), 27, 29; P. Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Jacobean Age* (1978), 72–6; *HMC Salisbury MSS* XV, 283; C. Russell, 'The Parliamentary Career of John Pym, 1621–1629', in C. Russell, *Unrevolutionary England, 1603–1642* (1990), 205–28, at p. 216, citing Pym's fears that papists having gained a toleration will progressively seek equality and then superiority, 'and after superiority they will seek the subversion of that religion which is contrary to theirs'.

[10] Richard Neile, *M. Ant. de Dnis. Archbishop of Spalato, his Shiftings in Religion* (1624), 10–11.

[11] BL, Lansd. MS 90, fo. 108^{v}.

[12] BL, Lansd. MS 90, fo. 136^{v}. This thinking lay behind the presentation of James I's *Premonition* (condemning the papal deposing power) to the authorities in Venice, L. P. Smith (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton* (2 vols., Oxford, 1907), I, 100–7.

[13] J. E. Booty, *John Jewel as Apologist of the Church of England* (1963), 74.

and even relative political security for its Church did not preclude the dangers of subversive popish alterations, as Protestant commentators who doubted England's elect status sometimes opined. At a deeper level, political forms and structures were no guarantee of any sort of religious stability and purity. True religion was always endangered by the corruption and decay of its external expression. The royal chaplain Benjamin Carier saw religion corrupted by politics: 'those points of doctrine wherin wee are made to be at warrs with the church of Rome . . . argue the Corruptions of that state, from whence they come'. In his view 'the contradiction of doctrine hath followed the alteration of state, and not the alteration of state bin grounded uppon any truth of doctrine'. In Humphrey Leech's opinion, the rule in England was 'pipe state; and dance Churche', and 'religion must have no coate otherwise, then measure is taken by the State'.[14] Matthew Sutcliffe would have agreed with Carier, though from a different perspective. Among the motives which Sutcliffe identified as inducing 'so many to like their [Roman] religion' were 'Fire and Sword' and tyrannicide.[15] William Bradshaw thought that conversion to true profession of Protestant religion was within the realm of grace but could be hindered by unfavourable political circumstances. Political uncertainty over religion assisted the Romanists greatly. The secular authorities must assist grace by dashing the political aspirations of the papist 'of state' who adheres to his Romanist profession because he conceives 'great brittlement and uncertaintie in the course of this present government which he supposeth cannot longe last'. By strict enforcement of the law such a person might be compelled to become a Protestant 'of state'. Political Protestantism could then create a holding area out of which Protestants of religion might be drawn by grace.[16] For all these writers, movement in one sphere, political or religious, engendered movement in the other.

One might still enquire whether this mattered very much if England's Protestant polity was so firmly secured, particularly after the principal elements of Catholic resistance had petered out in the early 1590s. Undoubtedly, the actual number of people who, after a period of uncertainty, positively affirmed that Rome was the safe way to salvation, and then signalled it unequivocally by going abroad or refusing to attend church, was relatively small (considered in relation to the total number affected by contemporary religious issues). But this is to miss the significance of

[14] Benjamin Carier, *A Treatise* (Brussels, 1614), 34; Humphrey Leech, *A Triumph of Truth* (Douai, 1609), 102; cf. James Sharpe, *The Triall of the Protestant Private Spirit* (St Omer, 1630), 271.

[15] Matthew Sutcliffe, *The Examination and Confutation of a certain scurrilous Treatise entituled, The Survey of the newe Religion* (1606), 28.

[16] William Bradshaw, *Humble Motives* (n.p., 1601), 10–15.

conversion. If conversion were just a matter of expressing allegiance to a political position, then defections to and from Roman Catholicism would be of little interest historically since there is no evidence that numerical fluctuation of itself was ever sufficiently great to make much difference.[17] But, even in pure politics, it was clear enough that activism rather than a democratic counting process was what mattered. As Sir Robert Cotton remarked, 'to what purpose serves it to muster the names of the Protestants, or to vaunt them to be ten for one of the Roman Faction? as if bare figures of numeration could prevaile against an united party'.[18] When an individual converted to Rome, he demonstrated the existence of a hidden fund of latent popery about which Protestants had every reason to be anxious. Paradoxically, most conversions from Rome also emphasised the instability of the religious settlement since they dressed up the providential Protestant homecoming in the language of escape from almost certain spiritual death and the alluring attractiveness to the majority of idolatry and superstition. Virtually all conversions, therefore, were a visible index of man's general tendency to stagger in religion. This was certainly not limited to the comparatively small number of overt and outrageous rejections of one or other Church which hit the headlines in this period (though such changes were thought, according to a religious domino theory of conversion and apostasy, to induce a cascade of further alterations in faith and allegiance).[19] Whether the total number of Catholics was increasing or decreasing was far less important than whether the increase or decrease occurred through the mechanism of change of religion. Contemporaries were acutely aware of this. When, in the first

[17] The problem of counting converts is an intractable one. John Bossy has made an impressive effort to estimate numbers of Catholics in England during this period, J. Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (1975), chapter 8. But this is a different exercise from measuring flux in religion to and from Rome. A manifest difficulty is that the records of changes of religion are even more patchy than the evidence of how many English people during this period could be described as Catholics or papists. It is, of course, possible to count people who abandoned the Church of England by becoming recusants, or conformed to the established Church by abandoning recusancy. (Such records confirm contemporary comment that at times when the regime took severe measures against papistry many more people would conform than at times when the State took a more relaxed view, and that when the regime looked set to tolerate Romishness, the number of persons prepared to consider themselves as in some way Catholic shot up.) But the records of conformity and nonconformity in religion were usually generated for bureaucratic purposes and so do not give a full account of how many people altered their religion in defiance of or obedience to the State. In consequence I have largely shied away from making bold statements about numbers of converts because such figures more often provide information about the system which recorded them than about national trends in conformity.

[18] James Howell (ed.), *Cottoni Posthuma* (1651), 114–15.

[19] Contemporaries frequently saw notorious conversions as indicators that other individuals would do the like, N. McClure (ed.), *The Letters of John Chamberlain* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1939), I, 483; CRS 68, 14; CRS 64, 36; G. Wickes, 'Henry Constable, Poet and Courtier, 1562–1613', *Biographical Studies* 2 (1953–4), 272–300, at p. 290.

decade of the seventeenth century, the Venetians quarrelled with the papacy the excited English diplomatic party in Venice attempted to convert specific Venetians and to create separate Protestant congregations there.[20] In part this was because anti-papal foreign Catholics were useful for the polemic they could write against papal authority.[21] But the Venice phenomenon had a theological significance as well. One mark of the true Church which all contemporaries recognised was that it must continually increase. The Venetian quarrel with the papacy, and individual rejections of Rome associated with it, suggested to Protestants that the Church of Rome was in decline, and therefore not the true Church which it claimed to be.[22] Many Protestants thought that the notorious Archbishop de Dominis's severance of links with Rome and arrival in England (by way of Venice) in 1616 was a sign of Rome's inevitable decline, God's apocalyptic decrees against Babylon. Thomas Goad saw that God had 'raysed Wickleff from their Schooles, John Husse from their Pulpits, Martin Luther from their Cloysters, and now Mark Antonie [de Dominis] from their Arch-episcopall Chaire', and 'nowe Dalmatia [which de Dominis deserted] looking over the Venetian Gulffe, assureth Italie that her next Advertiser shall bee within her bowels'.[23]

This perception of conversion suggests to us that it is a misreading to see the English Reformation just as a struggle between two tightly consolidated blocs, Roman and Protestant, facing each other across a deserted religious no-man's-land with a few isolated and lack-lustre nonentities risking the shell-fire in order to move backwards and forwards between the two positions. Institutional transfer of loyalties was a reflection of other aspects of conversion which can be seen only in the shallowest sense as the product just of institutional strife.

In the chapters which follow I propose to explore conversion as an historical phenomenon in this period. First, why did people change their religion? The polemical books, the manuals of controversy, contain almost every possible argument which was ever used to urge contemporaries to

[20] N. Malcolm, *De Dominis (1560–1624)* (1984), viii–ix, 37–8; Smith, *Life*, I, 90–1, 94, 116, 161–2, II, 148–9, 178–9; T. W. Jones (ed.), *A True Relation of the Life and Death of William Bedell* (Camden Society, second series, 4, 1872), 105–6; BL, Lansd. MS 90, nos. 54, 66; *HMC Salisbury MSS* XIX, 71–2; *CSPV 1607–10*, 270.

[21] CRS 68, 11–12.

[22] The contemporary annotator of the Bodleian Library's copy (Antiq.e.E.1608.8) of Anthony Wotton, *A Trial of the Romish Clergies Title to the Church* (1608), 290, a tract written in answer to John Percy, *A Treatise of Faith* (n.p., 1605), remarked that the Church of Rome could not be the true Church because 'she hath decreased within these 200 yeeres I thincke well nighe the one halfe of that she was'.

[23] Marc'Antonio de Dominis, ed. and transl. Thomas Goad, *A Declaration of the Reasons* (Edinburgh, 1617), 3–4.

think about change of religious allegiance. But as the second chapter argues, the essence of conversion does not lie in polemical texts, even though all contemporaries recognised that the changes of allegiance which polemicists dwelt on were a central element of true conversion. In chapter 3 I suggest that changing allegiances can be elucidated only through a reconstruction of what individuals did rather than what rival polemicists told them to do. There was a potentially radical division between the intellectual perceptions of religious division thrown at people and the way in which they actually experienced conversion between antagonistic expressions of Christianity. Of course, even without the hectoring of the clerical controversialists, the waverers still found that the aspects of religious faith which they regarded as changeable had a tendency to be battered into politically articulated forms and that their changes of religion tended to be subject to the quasi-political discipline of polemical ideas. If, as all the handbooks of practical religion told them, the pursuit of true faith meant a personal experience and outward effectual signification of conversion and repentance, this had to be given formal expression through the liturgy and sacraments of a true and particular institutional Church. This outward profession of conversion was vulnerable to a politicising of religion, even to the extent of virtually identifying either the Church of Rome or the Church of England with the practice of true religion. Still, conversion extended beyond mere allegiance to institutional Churches, and, so chapter 4 argues, changes of religion to and from Rome did not occur along a simple spectrum of obedience, at one end an acknowledgement of papal primacy, at the other a genuflection to a royal one. The second half of the book unravels contemporary attitudes towards practical proselytisation. The major player was the State which could not ignore the fact that people's innermost religious beliefs were in some ways connected with their political obedience. But how far could the State demand that people resolve the tension between religion and politics so as to conform according to law? Failure to enforce conformity was surely the result of inherent structural weaknesses in the early modern State rather than of any failure of nerve or intention on the part of the regime? But, chapters 5 and 6 contend, while the regime could quite effectively prevail upon individuals to conform very thoroughly, this was not the same as persuading all towards a profession of a single version of true religion. Tensions between the requirements of politicians and churchmen explain better than pure provincial localism or bungling officialdom the slow and uncertain spread of English Protestantism, or at least the ease with which its dispersal could be resisted. Chapter 7 suggests that the clerics on both sides who used their rhetorical gifts to influence potential converts did not always think just to instil a politico-ecclesiastical obedience in new proselytes. Instead they experimented with conversion in a way which transcended

politico-ecclesiastical boundaries. This approach to conversion, it is suggested, will perhaps alter the way we discuss Catholicisation and Protestantisation, and the nature, speed and success of the Reformation in England.